Guide Us To Thy Perfect Light

By

David McCann

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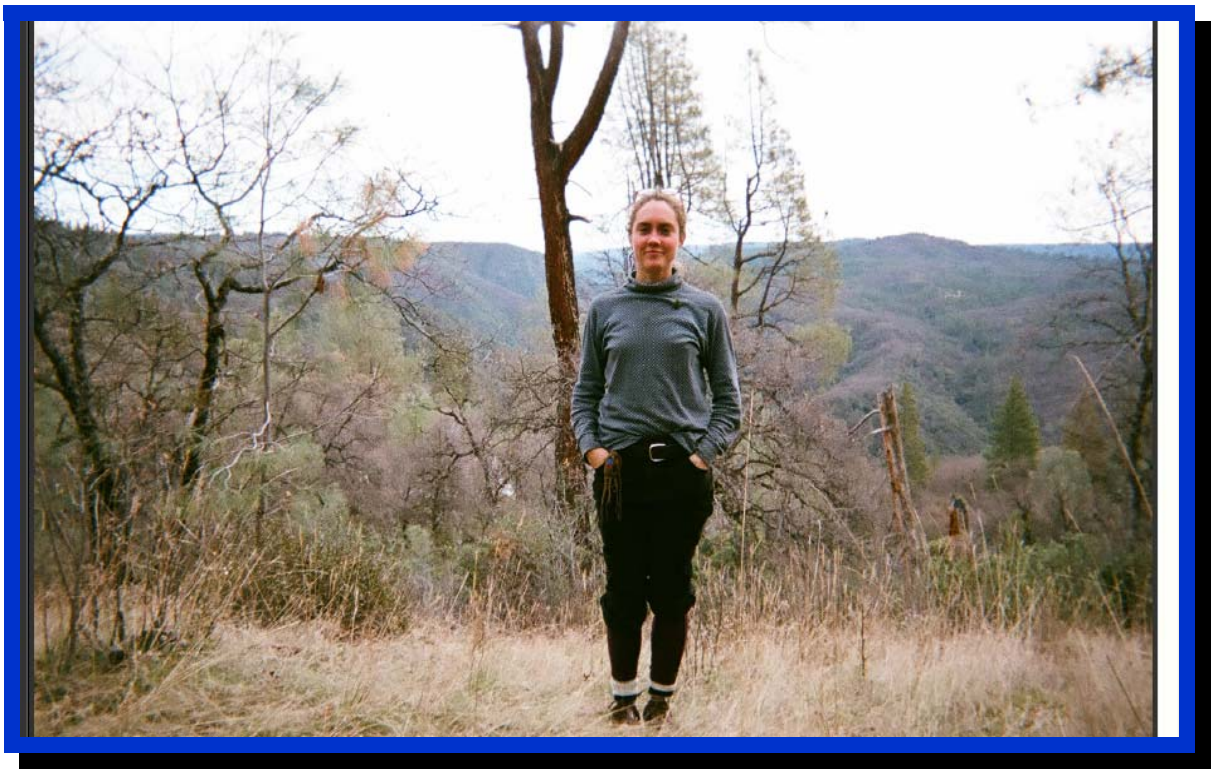


Star of Wonder
Star of Night
Star with Royal Beauty Bright
Westward Leading
Still Proceeding
Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light

Dedicated To John Henry Hopkins, Jr. whose 19th century Christmas Carol provides the passion for a life long search "For Thy Perfect Light".

Foreword

As I write this on a snowy February afternoon - there are still earthly seasons separating me from the yearly celebration of Christmas.

But, forever in my memory, an A.D. 2009 Christmas adventure was about spiritual renewal – and a commentary about human foibles, and, yes, human virtues.

It's about trains. Human society aboard the train. And the dignity, and less desirable behavioral traits of humans aboard a holiday train.

It's about mountains and valleys.

And it's about the spirit that moves the human soul.

And while human behavior is far from being exemplary, continuously, we do see glimpses perfect light emanating from the human spirit.

My fondest hope is for humans to find the spiritual nourishment that should be a part of their being. And that nourishment is found in many different forms as I was to experience

We are complex creations – and a society of humans in the close confines of a moving train points to the value of spiritual goodness in manners, conversations, and interpersonal behavior.

In December, 2009 my daughter insisted that I come to visit her in Northern California. I wasn't sure what to expect given the canyon that separated our personal life styles.

Those canyons are identified in this book – but this is not a book that passes judgment – it is an observation of a Midwesterner – who has

conjugated – taken apart – what he has seen and incorporated the observations into the whole of a life's experience.

Fathers can learn a great deal about the world from the perspective of their children.

A great deal.

For one moment in time – I learned a great deal about my daughter who was, for one Christmas season, the perfect light.

And while its radiance dims by the miles that separate us – she still is "a star of wonder" in my eyes.

A train ride west across the United States, and being in the backwoods of California provided me – amidst the chaos of my personal life – a spiritual renewal.

There have been moments of great spiritual awakenings in my life, but these spiritual moments put wind into our sails as we seek to move forward across the tumultuous sea of life.

What brings an unemployed, divorced, middle aged – 54 year old man to undertake a journey by train across the country to an entirely new environment of living?

Then again, what brings an unemployed, divorced, middle aged – 54-year-old man ***from the Midwest*** to undertake a journey by train across the country to an entirely new environment of living?

There are Midwest sensibilities of God, Country, and Family; and I was going into the frying pan of the nation's liberalism out of …. Love?

And while my Midwest sensibilities would be taken to task in northern California – not against me personally, by the snide comments as "those Midwesterners are a peculiar lot! Why did you hear about the woman in the Wal-Mart store in Indiana taking "bad" books off their shelves?"
(In a quiet moment my daughter would hug me and say "I love my Mid-west roots")

Was I concerned? You betcha.

But given everything I had endured since the blitzkrieg quadruple whammy of losing my job, my wife, and my family, and my house what else could possibly happen?

I love my three children.

And what my eldest child, a 23-year-old daughter offered me, while giving me pause, was something I wanted to do.

Truly.

That Sunday evening of 20 December the snow was flying and the wind was howling all along the east coast. But in the Midwest the night skies were clear.

At 8 PM I was in a warm bed in expectation of getting up early to catch the westbound Capitol Limited from Cleveland to Chicago.
But as I looked at my watch, my brow was furrowed, as I was concerned.

The lynchpin of my trip from Cleveland west to California hinged on the on time arrival of trains from either Washington – The Capitol Limited – or from New York City - The Lakeshore Limited.

I called the AMTRAK reservation line computer and was told by Julie, with her ever present perky computer generated voice (:"Hi – I'm Julie!"), that my train was running running three hours late.

"I better talk to a real human," I thought to myself.

So I waited on the line. And was told, as I expected, the weather was playing havoc with trains out of Washington.

If I took the Capitol Limited it would cut it close coming into Chicago, assuming no other delays.

I called Mark who was giving me a lift to Cleveland's East 9th Street station and told him there was a delay with the train arriving at 5 AM.

"See you at 3," I said.

And I went back to sleep.

From the formality of religion where I served as a sponsor, here pictured with the new Catholic Christian Mark at the microphone – I was entering a new dimension in the wilderness of northern California.

Ten days earlier my daughter had called me and invited me to California. And she was footing the bill. I did some research as to the cost and said that while she was very generous, she would have other travel obligations in 2010.

"Save your money," I said.

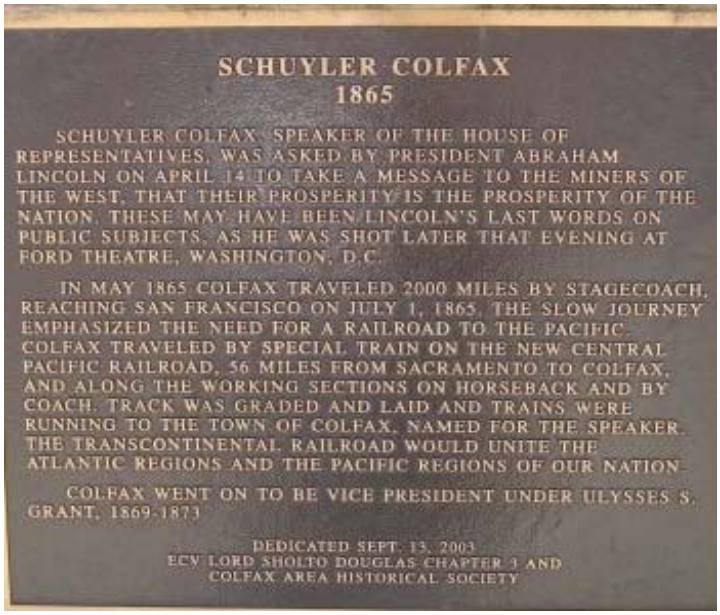
But that story wasn't over.

While seated at a local diner with friends, a cell phone call was coming in from my daughter. I excused myself and took the call.

She wanted me to come, period. It was an investment of $673 roundtrip from Cleveland to Colfax, California and home. The email confirmation would appear within the next few days.

Interesting about the Colfax name – Schulyer was his first name. A native of Indiana, Colfax would serve as Speaker of the House of Representatives during Lincoln's term and would reach the pinnacle of his political career by serving as Vice President under Ulysses Grant.

In her teen years, my daughter, in forming a political philosophy, would walk two miles every Saturday from our Market Street home to Colfax Place in the city's Highland Square. There she would meet with a group called Food Not Bombs and prepare hot meals for the city's needy. And now once again, the Colfax name would become a significant part of our respective lives.


SCHUYLER COLFAX
1865
SCHUYLER COLFAX, SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WAS ASKED BY PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN ON APRIL 14 TO TAKE A MESSAGE TO THE MINERS OF THE WEST, THAT THEIR PROSPERITY IS THE PROSPERITY OF THE NATION. THESE MAY HAVE BEEN LINCOLN'S LAST WORDS ON PUBLIC SUBJECTS, AS HE WAS SHOT LATER THAT EVENING AT FORD THEATRE, WASHINGTON, D.C.
IN MAY 1865 COLFAX TRAVELED 2000 MILES BY STAGECOACH, REACHING SAN FRANCISCO ON JULY 1, 1865. THE SLOW JOURNEY EMPHASIZED THE NEED FOR A RAILROAD TO THE PACIFIC. COLFAX TRAVELED BY SPECIAL TRAIN ON THE NEW CENTRAL PACIFIC RAILROAD, 56 MILES FROM SACRAMENTO TO COLFAX, AND ALONG THE WORKING SECTIONS ON HORSEBACK AND BY COACH. TRACK WAS GRADED AND LAID AND TRAINS WERE RUNNING TO THE TOWN OF COLFAX, NAMED FOR THE SPEAKER. THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD WOULD UNITE THE ATLANTIC REGIONS AND THE PACIFIC REGIONS OF OUR NATION.
COLFAX WENT ON TO BE VICE PRESIDENT UNDER ULYSSES S. GRANT, 1869-1873
DEDICATED SEPT. 13, 2003
ECV LORD SHOLTO DOUGLAS CHAPTER 3 AND
COLFAX AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Schuyler Colfax Speaker of the House of Representatives was asked by President Abraham Lincoln on April 14 to take a message to the miners of the west that their prosperity is the prosperity of the nation. These may have been Lincoln's last words on public subjects as he was shot later that evening at Ford Theatre Washington DC.

In May 1865 Colfax traveled 2000 miles by stagecoach reaching San Francisco on July 1, 1865. The slow journey emphasized the need for a railroad to the Pacific. Colfax travelled by special train on the new Central Pacific Railroad, 56 miles from Sacramento to Colfax and along the working sections on horseback and by coach. Track was graded and laid and trains were running to the town of Colfax named for the Speaker. The transcontinental railroad would unite the Atlantic regions and the Pacific regions of our nation.

Colfax went on to be Vice President under Ulysses S. Grant 1869-1873.

I knew she was living in a primitive living environment north of Nevada City – so I stocked up with the essentials from the Target Store - vitamins, hand lotion, toilet paper, matches, laundry detergent, gloves, socks hats, and chewing gum.

I wasn't sure what to expect other than for ten days my accommodations would be aboard a converted Blue Bird School bus left for

me by the vacationing owner of the spiritual restoration campus north of Nevada City, California. My daughter's campus home was a triangular pinewood tepee.

Mary in front of her pinewood tepee

Surprisingly, I was awakened at 11PM by the AMTRAK station manager in Cleveland who, in receiving a message from the national call center, rescheduled me on the Lakeshore Limited out of New York. It was running on time. I was relieved knowing I would get into Chicago in a timely fashion to make my connection.

So, with confidence, I started singing the Bud DeSylva and Joseph Meyer song:

California here I come!
Right back where I started from
Where bowers of flowers
Bloom in the spring
Each morning at dawning
Birdies sing at everything
A sunkisted miss said don't be late
That's why I can hardly wait
Open up that golden gate
California, Here I Come

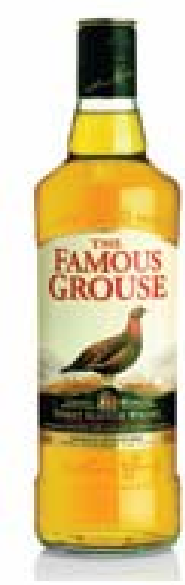
Happily, I alerted Mark to pick me up at 12:30 AM.

In addition to my backpack, complete with pillow and blanket, I had my assorted camp clothes packed into a large bag with a shoulder strap, my Berchtesgaden boots (boots that I wore four years earlier on another spiritual adventure in Germany), a toiletry bag which would be easily accessible throughout the course of the trip, my clarinet (as one of the residents on campus was also a clarinet player), and my church hymnal.

When he picked me up, Mark surprised me satchel filled with snacks prepared by his wife and daughter. Happily for me the treats included a pack of Lucky Strike unfiltered cigarettes, and a bottle of Famous Grouse scotch.

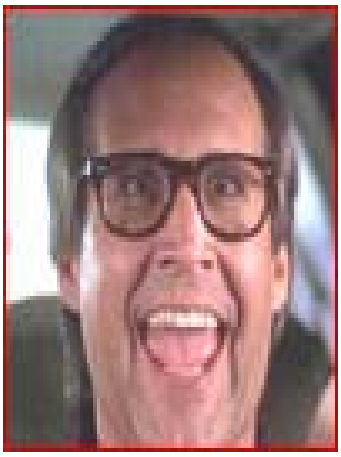
Life was good.

A time-out with a cooling drink.
A shady place to rest.
At times like these a smoke goes good.
And Luckies taste the best!
(Luckies taste better than any other cigarette!)
Be Happy-
Go Lucky!
LUCKIES TASTE BETTER
THAN ANY OTHER CIGARETTE!
Fine tobacco—and only fine tobacco—can give you a better-tasting cigarette. And L.S./M.F.T.—Lucky Strike means fine tobacco. That's why you'll find that Luckies taste better than any other cigarette. So, Be Happy—Go Lucky! Get a carton today.
Now here's a tip from me to you,
It's one you ought to try—
Support our boys, buy U.S. Bonds;
Like Luckies, they're a buy!
(Luckies taste better than any other cigarette!)
A LUCKY STRIKE FOR ALL AMERICA!
BUY U.S. DEFENSE BONDS
LUCKY STRIKE



The Cleveland train station is non descript – a brick steel complex with dimmed florescent lights – and a snoozing crowd waiting for the inbound and out bound trains. But the trains with their GE diesel locomotives, and with their lights blazing and horns sounding, give any railroad station its life and energy! Sure beats the monotone greeting you get at an airport "Good day ladies and gentlemen your flight is now ready to board." Bah!

I had practiced the negotiation of hauling my luggage – knowing there might be the occasion where a baggage cart would be unavailable and I would have to carry my luggage. In my mind, I kept thinking about the Clark Griswold character and the assortment of vacation follies he experienced in Europe and America.



To me – at a minimum, there had to be some degree of sophistication in carting around luggage!

Mark and I chatted at the train station for about an hour and he left at 2:30 AM. The train arrive at 3:15 AM - pretty much on time.

I settled into my seat for the first leg of this trip; snoozing, munching on Kathy's peanut and jelly sandwiches; sipping on good, good Amtrak coffee. The cities passed by - Elyria, Sandusky, Toledo, Bryan, Elkhart, and Chicago.

Arriving in Chicago – I used the red cap service throwing my bags on the electric cart. Accompanying me were two German nationals setting out to a ski resort in Utah.

A four hour wait – at Union Station goes fast; with other train departures and arrivals it is fascinating to watch the humanity coming and going - hither and yon!

My travel time from Chicago to Colfax, California would be, according to the Amtrak schedule, about 40 hours (It was actually 43 hours – not bad for a cross country travel considering all of the variables that go into rail travel).

I had thought about 40 hours in a reclining coach seat on the train. A strategy for survival had to be made as the thought of sleeping on that reclining chair was something I did not look forward to. The seats were definitely not suited for a man of 6' 1". Thank goodness I remembered a previous all night journey to Washington on the Capitol Limited where a fellow passenger told me to take advantage of the space behind the last seats at the end of each of the passenger cars. There I could lay flat.

And that's where I set up camp with my blanket and pillow.

The California Zephyr. Another footnote in the annals of my rail travels. I couldn't help but think of my personal history on the occasion of taking each of Amtrak's trains west from Chicago. The North Coast Hiawatha from Chicago to Seattle in 1978; the Sunset Limited in 1991; and now the California Zephyr in 2009.

In 1978, on the heels of Army service, I had taken the North Coast Hiawatha hoping to find employment. "Hire the Vet" was all the rage of the era. Except for me. In 1991 I took the Sunset Limited to San Diego for a telecommunications conference where I would pitch my election software that made voting possible by a secure telephone line. No investors.

And now – on the heels of nasty divorce instigated by my wife of 23 years (the Erica Manfred book ***He's History You're Not*** could be re-titled ***She's History You're Not***); a home foreclosure; run ins with the local court

system; and political partisans firing me from my civil service position, I was headed west once again; crossing the nation for spiritual renewal.

In this spiritual quest, a railroad's history figured prominently in my thoughts.

The history of our transcontinental railroad?

With the Central Pacific Railroad from the west and the Union Pacific from the east. there would be a golden spike hammered into the railroad tie at Promontory Point on 10 May 1869- heralding the beginning of golden era in railroads history. Rutherford Hayes, Ohio native and 19th President, travelled west on the train in 1880.

The only route change for the California Zephyr of the 21st Century was it went south into Colorado before entering Utah.

I was riding on the trail of a piece of American History.

By 1:00 PM hours on Monday the 21st – humanity was converging on the gate for the California Zephyr train. The train was schedule to depart at 2PM.

"Would families with children and senior citizens please come to the gate for boarding?"

An elderly lady asked me whether this was the train for Grand Junction – and I said (me, the "learned" one in geography – mind you, a dose of humble pie is always good for the soul)

"Grand Junction, Nebraska?"

She gave me a look as if I was a nit wit and said,

"Grand Junction, Colorado!"

Oops.

"All points west, Ma'am," I courteously responded with my mind now full of all of those destinations we were, in fact, going through.

Places like Galesburg and Burlington, Illinois, Ottumwa and Council Bluffs Iowa, Lincoln and Grand Island Nebraska, Fort Morgan Denver, (and, yes) Grand Junction Colorado, (into night two) Green River and Salt Lake City, Utah Elko and Reno (no time for gambling Nevada) across the Sierra Nevada and into Colfax, California named for the Speaker of the House, and Ulysses Grant's vice president.

I had my huge fold out national map readily available, and was humorously taken to task by fellow passengers about my taking copious notes of what I seen and heard throughout the course of the trip. One seat mate – enroute to her home in Wyoming via a stop in Denver, remarked in a mock serious fashion, "I suppose you have been keeping track of how many

cigarettes and beers I have had along the way!" She was going to Denver where she would drive north to her home near Wyoming's Guernsey Army Reservation where she worked.

There was one woman taking tickets for the hundreds who were boarding the train. The sense of adventure evident as the passengers passed through the boarding gate. And my ticket taken – I excitedly made my way to the California car the second to last car at the end of this long, long train.

In talking with passengers I respected their privacy, but was also genuinely interested in finding about America and its people.

In the car would be Valeria and Phil, Jillian (of the generation that doesn't tell you their last names on introduction – tell me about that?), a North Carolinian who was stranded in DC because of the weather and was now, finally, able to go home; a wealthy Texan who would later compliment me – the Ohioan - for my ingenuity in finding a comfortable sleeping space instead of paying the exorbitant sleeping car rate; the self confident Chicago resident heading for a Reno gambling junket (who, arrogantly, knew all about the trains) and his female friend who took *good care of him* in the night ride across Utah.

Seated in the passenger car we awaited departure. It was just like from the movie "The Silver Streak" with Gene Wilder, Richard Pryor and Jill Clayburgh; you could Henry Mancini's Orchestra in the background.

Some years earlier as part of a leadership class for government employees I was required to give a speech about any governmental issue. Throughout the class day, as I reviewed my notes, and looking at the government employees exhausted from listening to a litany of topically interesting but boringly delivered speeches, I pitched my notes in the trash. I

opted, instead, for something a little more lively, delivered extemporaneously.

The speech began with a crescendo spoken “board!” and dealt with passenger rail issues.

And, now, once again I would hear that same crescendo spoken “Board!” as the train prepared to depart the Chicago Union Station.

We were now headed west to the Mississippi River, but on a revised course due to a freight train derailment. At Rock Island, Illinois we prepared to cross the Mississippi River into Iowa. Slowly we crossed the Government Bridge that was built on the site of the first railroad bridge across the river - The Great River Bridge, built in 1856.

Passengers from the Illinois towns we missed were transported to Iowa, where on a cold winter’s night we would pick them up.

In the dining car I would have my dinner with the transport expert whose career in public transportation spanned from the 1940’s to the 1970’s. He and his waddling wife (poor thing couldn’t keep up with her husband who completely ignored her plight as she tried to negotiate her movements to the sway of the train) were both graduates of Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Mellon University.

He had worked in a variety of transportation positions in Ohio and Pennsylvania, ending his career serving with Gov. Milton Shapp D-PA during the 1970’s.

The Western Illinois University professor had an interesting story to tell. Recently retired as a professor of special education he had just graduated with a master’s degree in fine arts and was now set on pursing a new career. He was so excited about his new career.

A man of the Jewish faith, we talked about religion – this being December 22. We talked of his first wife – Baptist - and how in meeting her family and friends they were all taken aback by his being Jewish.

We both agreed life was all about doing our best in just being "good".

Amtrak's George took our order – not a happy attendant – but the food was good and the conversation went in a variety of directions; switching tracks like a Lionel electric train.

It was getting late and I prepared myself in fitting my six foot one frame in a yard square space. I was quite the contortionist, but I found comfort in being flat on the carpeted floor with my blanket and pillow.

Night one - across the frozen prairie of Iowa and Nebraska was one where the train literally hopped along the track maintained by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF).

What a ride!

Along this stretch of track I'm told those with motion sickness are well advised to take a motion sickness tablet before retiring for the night. Jostled is a better word to describe the experience. And where is the new owner of the BNSF when you need him? Calling Warren Buffett!

My legs got extremely restless so I found myself briskly pacing up and down the aisles of the train on repeated occasions throughout the night. There was too much adrenaline flowing through my system from the excitement of this travel.

Yes, middle aged men can still get excited!

Waking up early on Tuesday morning at 5:15, I took a sponge bath in the confines of the rest room/changing room. Shaven, and having put on a fresh change of clothes, I was presentable in time for the first call for breakfast at 6:30.

After breakfast I wandered about the train and then retreated to my space at the end of the passenger car for a snooze.

By mid morning we were set to make our arrival into Denver. All the switches were in order so we could literally back into the station.

At the Denver Union Station the train was expeditiously supplied with new provisions, water, and diesel fuel for the GE Genesis P42DC engines that would take us across the Rocky Mountains. In the meantime I would walk up and down the outside walkway; for the 30 or so minutes actually building up sweat!

Then onto the switch backs - ever upward into the Rockies on the well-maintained Union Pacific rail bed.

Then onto the switch backs - ever upward into the Rockies on the well-maintained Union Pacific rail bed.

I was in awe and let out exclamations of wonder “ah and ooo” as we made our way west.

The tracks through the tunnel would lead us to Granby, Colorado (elevation 7900) - site of President Dwight Eisenhower’s fishing jaunts. I got off the train in the midst of mountains so white with snow and a sky so blue a reflection in space of an earthly innocence.

I was in heaven.

My fellow passengers, happy to see someone so outwardly emotional, shared in my excitement and congregated around me so we could swap stories of our impressions of this magnificent winter landscape. OJ, an insurance agent from Kansas, told me about the great golfing during the warmer months of the year.

Dinner in the diner with Valerie and Phillip and Elena a former Clevelander now Chicago resident visiting her grandchild in San Francisco. The surly George was at it again; and I did my best to deflect his bad temperament.

I retreated to a space for the night in the last car of the train. Now I could stretch out completely without attendants kicking my feet.

We were going back and forth across the mountains into Utah's moonlit flat landscape. At one point in the wee hours of the morning, I peered out of the window of my back of the train crawl space to find we were quietly entering the station at Salt Lake City. Then, just as quietly as we had entered, the train departed.

Soon behind us was the lighted city of Brigham Young.

On to Nevada.

Riding coach is not without its challenges; but so long as there was water and a private space I was going to be all right. That meant water (cold) for washing and shaving; a sponge bath in the confines of a closet like space; and having room in the changing area below deck to put on clean clothes for the day.

As the dawn came to the snowy landscape of Nevada I was well into my routine. It was my last day on the train. It was Wednesday and by the afternoon I would be in Colfax.

I was too early for breakfast and was yelled at by one of the attendants.

"Why are you yelling at me? I asked. And then in response to my anger I enthusiastically responded "And good morning to you!"

I'll admit to being excited about the new day; but why were these attendants so cross?

Sitting down for breakfast, I listened intently as two teachers (one social studies, the other a math teacher) were playing the game of "can you top this" as they related the worst experiences they had in the classroom. One teacher from Grand Junction, and another from Los Angeles – back and forth.

Having sat quietly for five minutes listening to their diatribes, the Grand Junction teacher asked what I did. My philosophy had been like the Johnny Mercer/Harold Arlen song

You've got to accentuate the positive.

You've got to accentuate the positive
Eliminate the negative
And latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between

You've got to spread joy up to the maximum
Bring gloom down to the minimum
Have faith or pandemonium's
Liable to walk upon the scene

To illustrate my last remark
Jonah in the whale, Noah in the ark
What did they do just when everything looked so dark?

(Man, they said "We'd better accentuate the positive")
("Eliminate the negative")
("And latch on to the affirmative")
Don't mess with Mister In-Between (No!)
Don't mess with Mister In-Between

(Ya got to spread joy up to the maximum)
(Bring gloom down to the minimum)
(Have faith or pandemonium's)
(Liable to walk upon the scene)

You got to ac (yes, yes) -cent-tchu-ate the positive
Eliminate (yes, yes) the negative
And latch (yes, yes) on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between
No, don't mess with Mister In-Between

"A substitute teacher," I deadpanned.

The conversational brakes went on.

And the conversation turned to other interesting topics – significantly the teacher from Grand Junction had been on the eastbound California Zephyr in 1952 when the train was trapped by an avalanche in the Sierra Nevadas. She described her mother's fright – with her as a baby – in the mountains and the full scale efforts to save the passengers of the train.

She was now enroute to San Francisco. The other teacher was returning to Los Angeles charter school where he taught.

From the dining car I watched the sun rise over the Nevada landscape – an awe inspiring occasion as the train was swiftly moving closer to the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

But I was struck (having seen this on television) by the sight along the railroad tracks by the number of cows huddled together - being fed –

fattened and then led to slaughter. America loves its beef. And I will continue to be a beefeater, but somehow this huddling of cattle together being fattened for the slaughter didn't seem right. Just didn't seem right.

After breakfast I returned to my seat and had a chance to chat with willowy red haired Jillian who had attended the Athens, Ohio Ohio University before transferring to the Columbia School of Design in Chicago. Her father is in real estate, south of San Francisco and she was making a "quick trip" home, by train, for Christmas.

Jillian spoke of her family; how they would go to church on Christmas Eve; and what should she get for her father? (She, fortunately, had an Apple computer and she kindly allowed me to recharge my I Pod. (This was definitely an "Apple" train – there were few computers with Microsoft operating systems to be seen!)

Unfortunately not all the passenger cars have outlets for recharging electronic equipment so wandering throughout the train I was able to find an outlet for my cell phone. In the back of one the passenger cars I sat on the carpeted floor and just waited for my electronic equipment to recharge. It was a Zen moment - with legs crossed , eyes closed, and listening to the train as it glided across the Union Pacific rails.

Clickedy, clack; clickedy-clack, clickedy, clack.

An Amtrak passenger train is all about human society. We found out from Jillian's seatmate (who, too, was wandering about the train during the Tuesday night time hours) the couple (The Reno card shark and his female friend) shared my seat during the night. (I was at the back of the train). It was here that loud noises were emanating from under their blanket. It was quite a night time tryst!

“Disgusting,” we blurted out in laughter.

At the sunny Reno, Nevada stop aka “no time for gambling but time for three cigarettes” – a quick stop – but for me it was time to briskly walk walk up and down the station passenger walkway

Joining our group at the rear of the train was a Stockton Junior College professor and his son. Suffering from a nagging sinus infection, he took his medication which seemed to ease the pain. Conversation helped take his mind off of his misery.

He spoke of his forefather’s trip to California.

“Once West,” he said , “there is no inclination to go East.”

We were fast climbing into the Sierra Nevada Mountains and the volunteer commentators described the challenges faced by pioneers who chose this path through the mountains into the Golden State.

One group of pioneers was headed by the Donner family from Illinois. Their efforts in surviving the winter of 1846–1847 are well-known.

The snow; the mountains with blue and the white – and from the rear of the train I admired the tracks that had carried us so far west. So straight. So shiny as they reflected the winter sun.

Arriving in Colfax, California, the train stopped on Main Street to let us off. From the rear door window of the train my fellow passengers waved “goodbye” to me.

They called me Jack – Jack Lemmon; I suspect because of my easy come laugh and facial expressions.

I was met by the hugs of my daughter and her campus friend Laughter.

We walked to the 1974 yellow Volkswagen passing the statue of Schulyer Colfax who looked down with a smile on his face; a man asked by Lincoln to head west to reaffirm the nation’s commitment to the far flung state – which he did traveling over 2000 miles by stagecoach from St Louis.

And into the waiting Volkswagen beetle I went. The ladies had some business to attend to before going to the spiritual renewal campus. Going deep into the San Jose River valley, they parked the car and traveling along the steep paths found the blackberry vines which would be used to complete a basket that would sell for $100.

Traveling north on California State Route 49 to Mother Trucker’s Grocery, we made a right hand turn and we were there.

I was very, very tired.

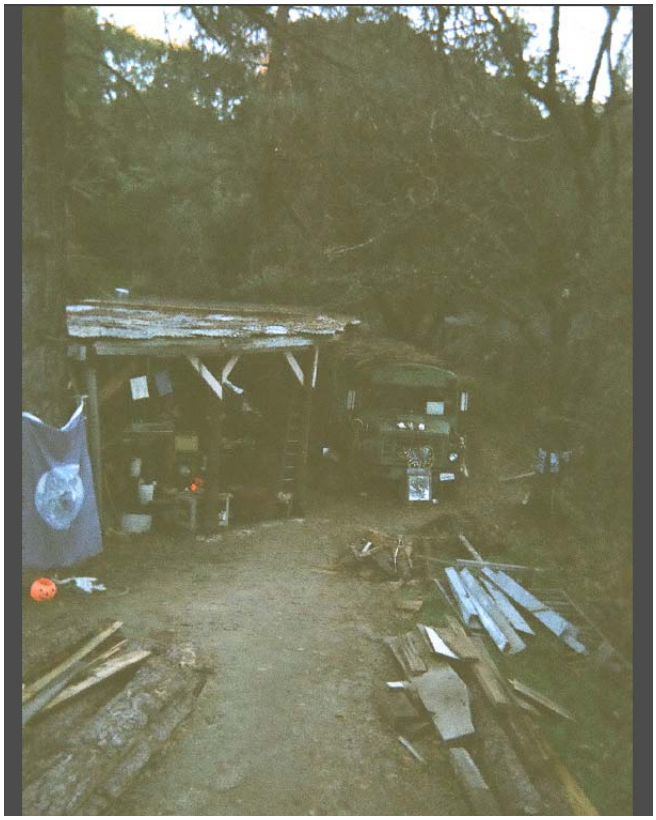
My arrival on the “campus for spiritual renewal”, as I affectionately called it, gave me a moment’s pause.

But in recalling the need to establish a routine - the world unfolds – the world with its 24 hour routine and 365 days of light and darkness.

I was now in an environment of austerity – a stove, solar powered lights, running cold water, no latrine – but human kindness among all. And, upon my arrival, with no fire in the stove on the bus – my first chore was to

get the fire lit. The fire lit, an aura of physical and spiritual warmth was established.

Let's get down to the routine.



There was Rye a Cleveland St Ignatius High School swimming star; – Laughter a talented musician and artist; my Sophia Smith College educated daughter, and Judson , a former student of the University of Wisconsin, who is her companion and boyfriend; And Nebraska - "Braskie" - the mixed chou and collie.

This region of Northern California — at the foothills of the snow peaked Sierra Nevada Mountains was where it was about creating the water diversions to the dry, dry south of California.

There were innumerable walking trails in this area.

The governor's trail, along Murphy Road, goes higher and higher and the views of the trail were quite spectacular. Looking across the San Juan River valley you could see the houses, with the curling smoke coming

out of their chimneys, that dotted the surrounding hills. Then, looking up, you could see the snow capped mountains to the northwest.

The trees and the foliage, even in December, were something to behold. I was astonished by the size of the pinecones – and was admonished, ever so gently, to leave them alone!

With my daughter I could have sat for days, and days. Just to talk, and to plan, and to reflect.

I rejoiced in her finding happiness

Can a father hope for anything more than that?

We would go to the great forests that surrounded the Malakoff Diggins State Park – where in the bright 24 December sunshine that adorned the landscape -we quietly cut down a small pine. Climbing along the cliffs this middle aged man was full of laughter because if it was here I was going to die, then so be it.

I didn’t.

And we found a lovely pine that would adorn the campus common hall for Christmas. I was a muddy mess but my face was full of joy.

And we found a lovely pine that would adorn the campus common hall for Christmas

Grass Valley is the 2nd largest city in the county – a commercial haven for all who need the honkey tonk of lights, movies, food and activity. It was at a Grass Valley Cineplex that I saw the blockbuster movie Avatar in 3-D. There was a profound message to that movie.

The great spiritual facilitator of Nevada County had invited an eclectic group of talented citizenry to include musicians, writers, teachers, business people, and farmers to his home for a December 24 party.

Christmas Eve was to take on a whole new meaning for me.

Midwesterners are misunderstood with what is viewed as our straight and narrow ways. We observe the world, and in making a conjugation of its elements, we couple that conjugation with what spiritually moves our beings. The Midwest sensibilities are highly suspect. (as I found at holiday gatherings). Why the bashing of the Midwest personality? It was a mystery to me. I was embarrassed and said nothing.

At the spiritual facilitator's home, I just sat and observed as pipes and other smoking materials were passed round. I'm a scotch drinker – and needed no more additional vices – I'll keep to that vice alone. But the aroma of the other smoking products sent me - well – (the British band "Jigsaw" 1975 #3 US hit single title sums it up best) "Sky High".

Over a hundred people gathered in the spiritual host's living room. And on cue, the red laser flashlights came alive. As the lights were dimmed, an array of red laser light streams became focused red dots on the living room wall.

Seated on the floor in the corner I was observing all that was happening. Our spiritual guide, resplendent with his red elf hat and shoes, set the stage for an hour spiritual renewal. It was Christ's Mass Eve in my book – but for those in attendance it was a moment of spiritual reflection. Guests who had been randomly selected offered a spiritual commentary. When one reflection would end, another of the chosen would add their thoughts. I closed my eyes and listened to the spiritual awakenings of the gathered. My daughter was asked to provide a moment's commentary. and I was greatly moved.

And while the Christ was never mentioned – his presence resonated throughout the room being referred to in other ways – nature, animal life, water, sky, and the stars above.

The great spirit, and gracious host of the party came and chatted with me about the misdiagnosis of Lou Gehring's disease. His body simply needed to be purged of lead. He was thankful to be alive.

Gracing the corner was a talented young soprano from Connecticut who was establishing her niche in music and drama on the new frontier of Northern California. I was smitten.

These men and women of Northern California are pioneers in their own way; and they have my respect for the lives they are leading.

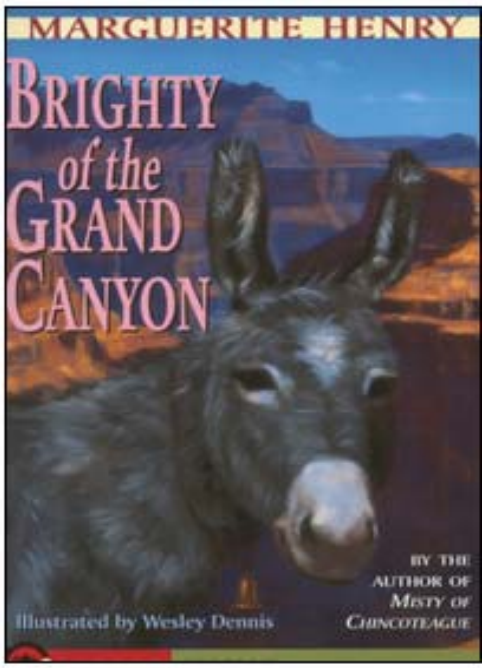
Progressives like Hiram Johnson of old ("The first casualty when war comes is truth.") – sought to divorce this nation from the world's hateful ways by embracing a spirit of isolationism.

Individual isolationism? National isolationism? I do know this, my experience on the western frontier showed me how the simple life can greatly enrich the soul

A more contemporary politician favored among the 24 December group was Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich.
"We love Dennis Kucinich" was the common theme when Nevada County Californians found out that I came from Ohio.

Google maps shows Nevada County, California to be rugged territory. It is perfect for those who want to divorce themselves from the worldly ways of war and find peace.

My mind was taken away from the worldly concerns, no news, no gossip, just the quiet of the backcountry and the braying of the neighbor's donkeys in the middle of the night. (The donkey fits very well into my mindset as when people ask me how I am I just reply "Oh just like Brighty the Donkey. You know Brighty from the Marguerite Henry book - Brighty and the Grand Canyon – just plodding along!")



Laughter, Mary, Dad, Judson, Brothers Sam and Brian
Christmas Day December 25, 2009

Donna aka Laughter had a Christmas present in store for all of us – her son Brian was going to drive us in his Volvo to San Francisco stopping briefly to visit Brian's father and new stepmother. We would be staying at the former US military base that housed Nike missiles, now the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Brian had just attended his father's wedding to a beautiful woman, some years his junior. She had been a journalist who covered Nevada County local government, and was now a safety officer for one of the local parks in San Mateo County.

He, Brian, was now the proud owner of his step mother's Volvo.

And nineteen year old Brian, in his brilliance, was able to cross the cultural bridge between his mother's austere life style of a pioneer and that of his more "establishment" father.

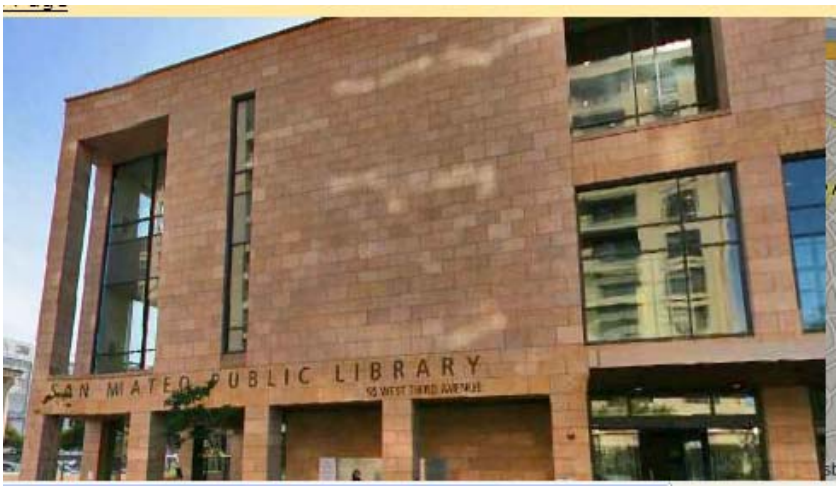
Only once would the mother and son engage in a political conversation – where the mother expressed a heartfelt political expression the US was responsible for starting World War II. Brian wasn't buying the argument. And I sat quietly in the back seat not peeping a word remembering I was their guest. (Remember – me, forever the perpetual student of history and political science.)

Brian would begin studies in engineering at the College of San Mateo living with his father and new stepmother. And I would have no doubt as to his success. His thick glasses belied a man of great energy passion for life – anything fast!

San Mateo where the north south Camino Real (The Kings Highway – California State Route 82) has significantly impacted the growth of the region – is a city of whose "livability" quotient has to be at least a "10".

There are always three elements to a city that are on top of my priority list – a city's parks; its libraries; and its religious centers. And David – Brian's father did not let me down in showing me around the city.

We walked through the Japanese Tea Garden – an intimate garden which provided a moment of tranquility. Then, walking briskly around the corner, there was to the San Mateo Library. The architecture is brilliant as the library has received a silver certification award for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design from the Washington DC based United States Green Building Council



Driving south from San Mateo, along California State Route 1 and parking at one of the many beaches that dot the highway; despite the cloud cover and brisk northwesterly winds – we walked and walked along the beach. The “youngsters” frolicked joyfully in the sand and cold surf.

There is a certain rejuvenating quality about the sea.

In arriving at the Marin Headlands Hostel in the Golden Gate National Recreational Area we were escorted to the room that would be our home for the night. Eight bunks in a large bay area on the second floor; a shower, men’s washroom, and a complete kitchen on the first floor Sheets pillows, and heavy blankets were provided.

Plopping my gear on the bunk and having made my bed – I wanted to witness the sunset over the Pacific. Brian joined me – expecting to run but was satisfied with the briskness of my pace – even with the age difference of some 35 years – I hope he was impressed.

We hustled to the top of the hill, walking briskly by the deer that didn’t mind our presence, the Nike missile site, and finally to witness one of the most spectacular sunsets I have ever seen. There was a huge red ball sinking into the Pacific Ocean.

From this peace time setting I couldn't help but think about the presence of deadly armaments on this tall hill and the defense they provided this nation. From age to age this was a remnant of a commitment that had to made to maintaining freedom's defense.

Some say "just leave us alone" – but to me we have been pushed, tugged, cajoled to be a part of the world. And how we embrace that responsibility still troubles the people of this nation.

We climbed to the top of an artillery observation hill to see the nightlights of San Francisco and a lonely freighter, laden with the exports of a great nation, making its way out to sea. Its horn was sounding a "goodbye" to the shores of the American nation.

We went briskly down the hill to meet my daughter who had, in her usual pioneer fashion, taken an off trail route to witness the sunset. She would later pay for that exploration by experiencing a plant rash which she treated with toothpaste.

Poor Laughter was sick – a flu-like bug had gotten her down and she was sleeping in the hostel. Brian and I set out to Sausalito for dinner. The beautiful twinkling of the lights around the bay area gave me pause – lights in the night along the bay – one of my spiritual moments!

In our dinner conversation over a shrimp and green pepper pizza at an Italian restaurant, we talked about his high school experience; he being disappointed at how American history was taught. As a part time social studies teacher – I inwardly cried. To me it is about the individual and collective personality of a people that attempt, to the best of their ability, to (in the words of our Preamble) maintain the blessings of liberty for ourselves and secure those same blessings of liberty to our posterity.

In my being so focused in our conversation, I had forgotten my Yorktown Battlefield cap and the gracious restaurant attendant chased after me down the street.

I had no fear of 19 year old Brian's driving abilities and spoke highly of his abilities to his father who, I was told by Brian, was forever chastising him.

Parents speak of their children's driving habits – but I had no fear – just as I don't when I am in the hands of those who, in rough seas, sail boats against the wind. To me there is a power at work - if this is my time - so be it. My fondest hope is those in command of my transportation exercise a bit of empathy as to how their passenger might feel.

But I was just a willing passenger as the young 19 year old negotiated the curvaceous roads outside of San Francisco.

Upon our arrival back from dinner I slowly walked to a darkened area of the national reserve to view the last phases of the December Blue Moon, and the stars overhead. You would never know you were outside of a major metropolitan area. There was complete silence and darkness.

Complete.

You don't want to miss a sunrise over San Francisco. And I did not.

Rising early at 5:30 to wash and prepare for the day, I found there wasn't a soul awake in the entire hostel. Not a soul.

Retracing my steps from the previous evening, I saw the spires of the Golden Gate Bridge rising above a fog that had engulfed the city. At my hill top site there were clear blue skies and the sun came above the fog to set the world ablaze in light for another day.

My daughter and Laughter marveled at the plant life of the region. So it was only natural our Tuesday destination would be the Conservatory of Flowers in the Golden Gate Park.

There were and rooms and rooms of flowers. For a cost of $7.00 per person, we had a magnificent two hours of taking a “trip” throughout the world – viewing the flowers and plant life from the world’s mountain environments - to the tropics of the Americas with its warmth and humidity.

In the corner of the museum gardens stood a statue of President James Garfield – a fitting tribute to the Ohio President fallen by assassin’s bullet on July 2, 1881.

James A Garfield
and a monument to the fallen President
completed in 1884 by the sculptor Frank Happersberger

For all the primitive quality of life, I was happily adjusting to the cycle of nature with its sun rises and sun sets – and a body chemistry ready to follow these earthly cycles. I witnessed the power of the earth by the gourd harvested from the campus garden. It would broken into parts to make musical instruments.

One evening by candlelight my daughter talked about the Preamble to the Constitution; just the magnificent words that set the stage for one of the most celebrated documents of secular human society. It wasn't easy reaching an agreement of our just *studying the words* – as we come to any discussion "with the baggage" of what we know about a society.

"Look at what we've done to this group and that group," she protested. And I insisted we put that aside if we were to discuss the value of the Preamble.

"Agreed."

Mary in the kitchen on the bus – the pieces of cloth – which she gave me as a Christmas present - have profound spiritual statements penned onto them

Here was a woman who attended Sophia Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts and then after one year, wanted to "live life!"

Sophia Smith *from the Sophia Smith Smith College Archives*

And what a life!

Beginning in the summer of 2006 at age 19 (she's now 23); from Northampton, Massachusetts to Katrina volunteer service in New Orleans; volunteer service in New York City and Washington, DC; to Flagstaff AZ

where she joined with her Firestone High School (Akron, Ohio) classmate to ride their bicycles to the Buffalo Field Campaign (protecting free range buffalos) in Montana; hitchhiking across the nation to visit her mother and brothers in Akron; north to Ontario and hitchhiking across Canada to Edmonton, Alberta then to Vancouver; flying to Hawaii to participated in a environmental protection movement; south to the Wildroots Earth Skills Homestead near Asheville, North Carolina; west to Vancouver Island and the Bear Mountain Tree Sit in Victoria British Columbia; joining with the Willing Workers on Organic Farms picking apples in British Columbia; then to Argenta BC and building kayaks; back to the Wildroots campaign in North Carolina; then west to Flagstaff to join with her high school friend where she befriends her friend Jud and they walk from Tucson to Phoenix and the North Maricopa Mountains Wilderness; then south to the primitive skills retreat in Santa Cruz County - west to the Mexican Baja peninsula north to the California Black Bear Ranch; to Happy Camp, California living under a tarp; north to Oregon to the Wolf Creek Campground; east to the Coyote Camp at Council, Idaho; then to Rexville, Idaho and the Rabbit Sticks Primitive Skills ; making friends and moving to Nevada City, California; east to Ohio where she worked at the local city zoo; back to California via the primitive skills school in Rexburg, Idaho and Bonner's Ferry, Idaho. And along the way, she contracted dysentery; lost her glasses (and didn't replace them for two months); and was thrown from a horse.

Should a father worry?

I was always up stoking the fire at 2 AM and again awakening at 5:30 AM. Lighting a candle to begin the day, I would piss into a wash tub (or as Nigel Hawthorne portraying George III would call it " piss pot") and

pooping onto a plastic bag and wrapping it up for disposal. Then, it was time to reignite the fire using a long aluminum straw that I would feverishly blow into. Heating up the water, I was ready for the morning sponge bath and other personal hygiene. By 6:30 I was ready. Let's get breakfast going. By 7:00, my daughter had completed her morning routine and walked from her pinewood tepee and would help me make breakfast. With a warm cup of tea in hand we would engage in delightful conversation, to be followed by a brisk morning walk through the adjacent hills. The long stride of a 6 foot 1 inch frame didn't seem to faze her – at 5'4". She welcomed the challenge of keeping up with me.

On the campus for spiritual renewal I always was thinking about whether we had enough firewood for the day and night. Forever - forward planning.

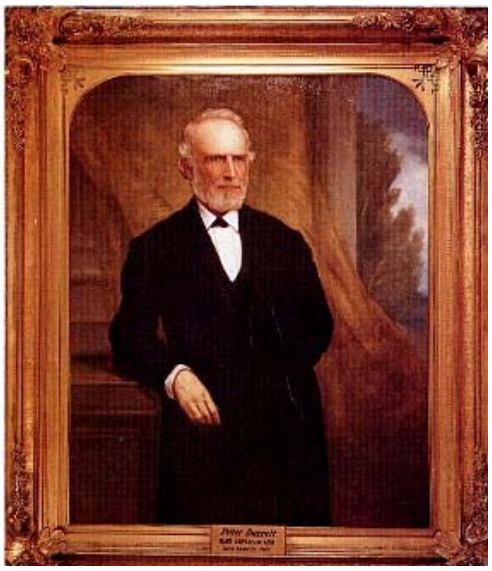
I slept so well in the quiet; actually dreaming again – good dreams – one so profound of Jacqueline Kennedy and the gentleness of her voice … Oh! To be addressed gently again - Not to be criticized or yelled at…

On the Thursday prior to my departure, Mary and I ventured into town Nevada City and Grass Valley – for a look around. I did my laundry, and Mary retreating to the Grass Valley library. Then a walk about in Nevada City – and its art, book and antique shops. The New Year's Eve crowd was coming into town – for the big party was at the city's premier hotel - The National.

THE NATIONAL HOTEL
THIS HOTEL, ONE OF THE OLDEST IN CONTINUOUS OPERATION WEST OF THE ROCKIES, OPENED FOR BUSINESS IN AUGUST, 1856. ORIGINALLY KNOWN AS THE "BICKNELL BLOCK", THE STRUCTURE CONSISTS OF THREE COMMON-WALLED BUILDINGS OF SIMPLE BRICK CONSTRUCTION EMBELLISHED WITH CLASSIC REVIVAL AND WROUGHT IRON RAILING ORNAMENTATION.
CALIFORNIA REGISTERED HISTORICAL LANDMARK NO. 899
PLAQUE PLACED BY THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION IN COOPERATION WITH THE NEVADA COUNTY LANDMARKS COMMISSION, JUNE 30, 1976.

New Year's Day, Friday, was a quiet day with the long walk along the governor's trail taking most of the day; and a quiet meal that evening. The governor's trail so named for the California's first governor Peter Burnett.

Interesting about Governor Burnett was his spiritual evolution from the Protestant tradition to Catholicism. (Remembering this is the mid 19th Century – a time of great prejudice against Catholics.) His book ***The True Church The Path which led a Protestant Lawyer to the Catholic Church*** lays out a formidable argument for a hike on the path to becoming a Catholic. (I have been there!)



That was a great sense of sadness in leaving California. But I rejoiced in all the spiritual renewal campus had to offer.

Looking to the sky, there were sundogs to the left and right of the sun.

It was so fitting.

On Saturday morning, 2 January 2010, it was a sunny and warm day. Dropped off at the Colfax train side awaiting the 1 PM train, I gave my daughter a hug goodbye; and with a wave from the yellow Volkswagen both Mary and Laughter were off.

Alas, tears welled up in my eyes.

I spent a moment looking at the statue of Schulyer Colfax and contrasting his means of transportation to the state in 1865 when he was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Speaker Pelosi's mode of transportation.

As I waited, John C. a passenger rail proponent approached me as I sat on a bench waiting for the train in downtown Colfax. Retired from California Power and Light he discussed his efforts to bring rail service back between Colfax and Nevada City. A daunting task, but he seemed very upbeat. We spoke of modern electric requirements and his time in the Navy.

As our conversation ended the train was pulling into Colfax – tying up traffic for about 15 minutes as passengers boarded.

The eastward journey was now beginning.

Up into the Sierra Nevada Mountains once again – clear crisp weather with deep blue skies and the white snow. I sat in the dome car mesmerized by the beauty.

We were on the smooth Union Pacific tracks heading east to Truckee and Reno.

The car mates were from Iowa, Wyoming, and California and I set to work pulling out my map and studying the various departure and arrival times .

I settled for the club car dinner – vegetarian burger and a Chicago style Bloody Mary served up in enthusiastic form by 26 year AMTRAK veteran Johnny. I was tired and found an ever present space at the rear of the train. My seat mate was delighted when I said you won't be seeing much of me – as I roamed throughout the train front and aft.

By 8:30 PM I was asleep.

Occasionally peering up I witnessed the passing Nevada and Utah landscape enveloped by the richness of the remnants of the December Blue moon glow.

In and out of Salt Lake City making our way west – by tomorrow evening, Sunday evening we would be in Denver.

My restless legs ached the whole night through but I was able to get some sound sleep as the train moved swiftly eastward.

Up early on the Sunday morning, I sat alone in the dining car and witnessed a beautiful sunrise over the Utah flats that lead to Colorado and the majestic Rockies. The snow sparkled brilliantly on the electric wires atop the ancient poles that were adjacent to the tracks – and as the train

moved swiftly by – the snow would blow away in a thousand points of sparkling light.

"Powered sugar" covered the hills the whole way east to Denver. And while delayed for an hour at the border of Utah and Colorado, as the track crew ahead dealt with a Union Pacific track issue (in the cold the switches get stuck) – it wasn't long before we were moving again.

The attendants were considerably more surly on this leg of the trip – east ; in attempting to find power outlets to recharge a cell phone I was constantly taken to task by their incessant asking "what are you doing here?!?

The demeanor was in sharp contrast to the holiday spirit exhibited by the crew going westbound on December 22.

No religious services on the train – so I wrote; read; napped; quietly sung hymns to myself.

We entered the heart of the Rocky Mountain and I sat in awe.

Mother earth spiritually moved me.

"God how I love America!" I said to myself.

And there's nothing finer to accentuate the experience than sipping on Amtrak Chicago style Bloody Mary's.

Mountain cliffs of brown and orange - to the left and right of me. And as the sun set to southwest – I paused to think. Does anyone think of the sacrifice of those who constructed this railroad and the cost in its upkeep?

This railroad is a magnificent testimony to human ingenuity and determination. It will get done!

As I headed east I found a far less conversant passenger crowd. I always enjoy engaging in conversation with passengers. And generally most people are receptive; not prone to faux reading or sleeping.

The two 30ish Russian women conversing in their mother tongue – were not keen on making contact with any American. But what you expect – you hear a language and you make inquiry –

"Where are you from?"

Blank stares.

"Heck, I thought to myself, "I was only trying to be friendly."

Smoke breaks proved to be a vexing matter for cigarette smokers. The smoking break would come in multiple hour increments. The poor cigarette smokers would get quite antsy at their not being able to light up. And when there was a smoke break – they were lighting them up one after another after another.

My seatmate was one of those suffered greatly for the want of cigarettes which she compensated by drinking great quantities of beer.

Lori - an animated woman – works at the Guernsey Military Reservation, Wyoming. Humorously, as I was continuously making notes on my US map, she asked whether I was keeping track of her beer and cigarette consumption. And the closer we got to her destination in Denver she became more humorously animated.

Across the aisle University of Iowa student Noelle laughed as I did. Her father is a professor emeritus of pharmacology.

Although, as she laughed, her mind was on her Iowa home where a broken furnace had been reported to her by her boyfriend.

Take away the cellular phones!

There was a long long descent into the lights of Denver; that same switchback the train had followed upward and westward on 22 December was now leading me eastward in a descent into a landscape of light for as far as the eye could see.

No one believed me when I said the train would be backing into the station; all the switches had to be in place before this long, long train could complete its journey into Denver.

So Lori from the Guernsey Military Reservation was gone as was Ray – who was seeking a single person allotment of temporary financial assistance in Colorado. (Given the cost of living was too much in California he was heading east to Colorado. Some states provide cash assistance to single men and women.)

Ray was headed to a homeless shelter. And all of us pitched in to provide him with money, food and cigarettes for his stay.

“It would be ‘OK’ ” we all assured him

We arrived in Denver at 7:18 PM . Within minutes the crews were refueling the GE railroad engines. All the accoutrements of passenger rail travel were being loaded up for the last stretch to Chicago.

Hopefully, in less than 24 hours we would be in Chicago.

The last leg from the west would be the most nerve wracking. I guess I was excited about going home; to what I didn’t know.

The day with its awe inspiring mountain views was over. And I was tired. But where to stretch out?

There was too much hustle and bustle in the train as it left Denver and I just need a place of peace and quiet.

With my blanket and pillow in hand I headed to the luggage car – unheated – snow coming in through the cracks - but wearing my leather jacket and hat I stretched out on the cold surface and was able to rest for two hours. After a two hour snooze everything had settled down on the train and I was able to find a spot to stretch out in the heated comforted of the coach.

It was looking good for my connection in Chicago with the Capitol Limited.

All systems go.

Anchors away.

By Omaha everything was turned on its back.

Amtrak had linked up some private passenger cars in Denver – an obviously older lot of equipment.

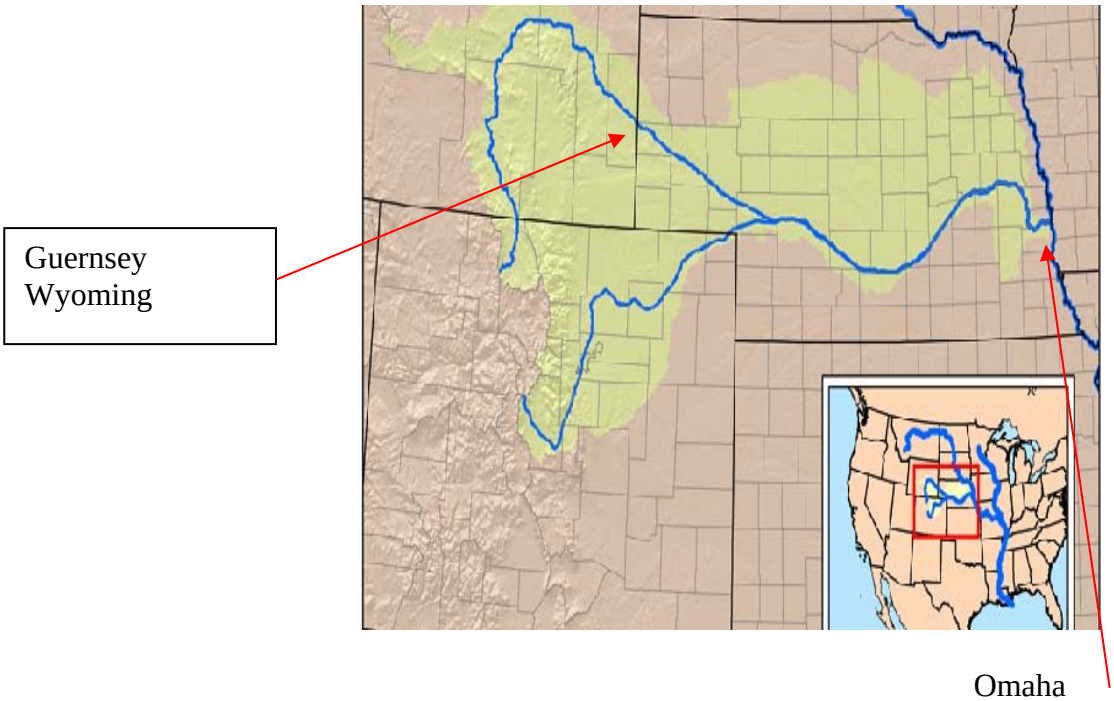
I was familiar with this exercise having ridden in a 1930 “Georgia 300” luxury private coach some years earlier at the back of Amtrak train from Orlando to St. Augustine, Florida. I had befriended Stanley Pinder, Director of Amtrak’s Passenger Advisory Board, who invited me to the back of the train to sit in the 1930 restored luxury passenger coach of a friend. On the open back balcony of the train, we sipped cocktails and watched the world go by.

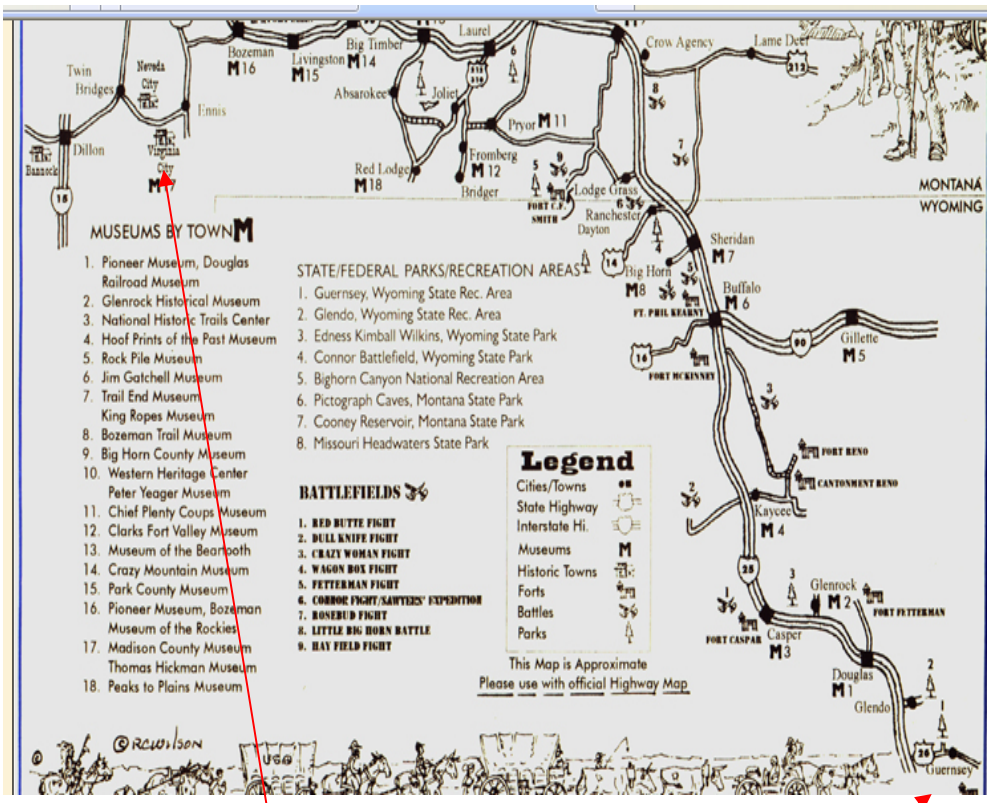
Stanley Pinder in front the Georgia 300. Mr. Pinder is now deceased.

A September, 2004 ***Smithsonian Magazine*** article spoke of the sentimental value of these old passenger rail cars.

The luxury passenger coaches that were now part of our train to Chicago (as I was to overhear the next morning in the cold of the new day) were having some brake issues. Outside of Omaha, these “issues” were holding up the rest of the train. This put my train connection in great jeopardy. All across Iowa I was hoping we would catch up time, but it wasn’t going to happen. We were going to be three hours late getting into Chicago.

Omaha had a special significance for me. In the 1860's a forefather had set out from Ohio for the 1,878 mile journey to the silver mines of Virginia City, Montana (now a ghost town). Traveling to the northern most part of the North Platte River he set out overland to Montana. In 1865 he started home for Ohio. My great-great grandfather Philip Doddridge Morris would die in October, 1865. He was buried in Omaha. And left at the Ohio homestead in Cadiz would be his wife Sarah Howell Morris and only child, my great grandmother, Emma Morris.





(For more information about the westward migration along the Platte River see Merrill Mates' 1969 book ***The Great Platte River Road)***

So maybe it was fortuitous the train was delayed in Omaha as I gave thought to the courage of a forefather who, too, was searching – searching – searching.

Chicago was 500 miles away.

There were so many towns and cities yet to go through -Council Bluffs, Red Oak, Creston, Osceola, Ottumwa, Fairfield, and the Mississippi River crossing at Burlington.

I looked at my cell phone clock. It wasn't looking good. And the poor conductor was of little help because Amtrak Chicago wasn't guaranteeing they would hold the departure of the 6:40 PM Capitol Limited even if we arrived at the 6:30 PM designated time. So I called the customer service number and was given the assurance I needed.

They would hold the train.

All of my planning of how I would expeditiously carry three pieces of luggage paid off. I was at the starting gate – backpack in place with my clarinet, blanket and pillow attached; and my suitcase secure around my person. The passengers waiting below deck smiled and offered me words of encouragement as I prepared to make the great "Amtrak" dash.

The train stopped and I was off.

"Good luck young man," they yelled after me.

At age 54, I appreciated their compliment.

Hello Clark Griswold!

The mad dash paid off as the service reps for the Capitol Limited waved me to the next track where, with 10 minutes to spare, I made it on board.

I literally plopped into the seat next to a woman from Peoria.

Literally plopped.

Sandra smiled and I introduced myself. This was her first trip by train. She was visiting her son on the occasion of his 40th birthday in Mentor, Ohio. Her late husband worked for the Caterpillar Corporation and

she spoke of her accompanying her husband to the Netherlands as part of his work.

We chatted about the grieving process in losing a loved one – either to death (her husband) or divorce (me).

The Capitol Limited is Amtrak's Cadillac of trains (Cadillac from the French adventurer Antoine de la Mothe sieur de Cadillac); new clean crisp lines – and Norfolk and Southern keeps the rail bed perfect – a smooth glide!

Antoine de la Mothe sieur de Cadillac

We had a late dinner at 8:00 joining with a lady enroute to be with her son at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. She thought Sandra and I were husband and wife and we all had a good laugh. And the laughter continued as the lady was an expert on Three Stooges comedy. She had us in stitches for the entire meal.

The two staff members were greatly stretched in providing services to a full dining car - but what was the rush? I enjoyed the broiled chicken dinner.

Oh what you overhear in the dining car. There were the two couples not listening to each other, but playing that game – “can you top this?” What ever happened to the art of conversation? Listening, questioning, and listening some more?

By the time dinner was over we were already approaching Toledo – and I settled in for a quick nap. After Sandusky, about an hour later, I awoke and remained attentive as we came into Elyria, and, getting closer to Cleveland, passing the International Exposition Center, and Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

In the early morning hours, the airport was quiet. But the runways were bathed in the spotlights that set the stage for airplanes to make their daily debut.

The train quickly moved passing the city’s rapid transit stations and making a turn to the right, Cleveland lay straight ahead. The Terminal Tower. The 200 Public Square Building. The Society Bank Building; The Cleveland Browns football stadium. All of these edifices took on an angelic appearance on the shores of Lake Erie. The city looked good.

Gathering my belongings, I waited for the train to stop.

And there was Mark.

My trip was over.

Or, as I continue to search for the perfect light, is the journey beginning?